



Federal Update for January 26 - 30, 2015



114th Congress ► Lawmakers' Priority: Fortify Promises to Vets

New Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Johnny Isakson (R-GA) said the first priority of his committee will be making sure Congress' promises to veterans from last year aren't forgotten. "We need to make sure the Veterans Choice bill is implemented and it's working, where it needs to be perfected, it's perfected," he told reporters 8 JAN. VA Secretary "Bob McDonald needs our support to see to it he can change the culture at the VA," Isakson said. "That in itself is a huge challenge and responsibility." Lawmakers returned to Washington, D.C., this week with a new House Veterans' Affairs Committee ranking member Rep. Corrine Brown (D-FL), new Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee leadership (Isakson and ranking member Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn.), and a host of unfinished veterans issues from last session.

Sen. Isakson said he has not outlined any specific legislative priorities or hearing schedules for his committee yet, and instead will use the next few weeks to work out those details with fellow panel members. But, in a statement after his leadership appointment, the 70-year-old Air National Guard veteran called this "a critical moment in history with the VA" and said his main charge as chairman would be "to bring value back to the VA and our veterans." Both House and Senate leaders are still dealing with the aftermath of last year's VA scandal in which administrators at dozens of department facilities were found to be doctoring records to cover up lengthy wait times for patients. Those problems forced the resignation of VA Secretary Eric Shinseki and numerous other top department officials, and the nomination of McDonald — a former Proctor & Gamble CEO with decades of management experience — to clean up the department.

Now, with a new Congress, lawmakers are promising continued oversight into that and other problems uncovered during months of public scrutiny for the often-ignored department. On 8 JANUARY, House Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Rep. Jeff Miller (R-FL) announced plans for an oversight hearing later this month into "the longstanding legacy of mismanagement and waste of VA's construction program." Both committees also are reviewing VA mental health programs, and have pledged to review the Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention Act, which narrowly missed congressional passage in December. And the long-term implementation and effects of the Veterans Choice Act — a sweeping, \$16 billion reform bill designed to provide immediate relief to the wait times problem — remains a concern for many in Congress. That measure included a new program allowing veterans in rural areas or facing long wait times at VA hospitals to more easily access private physicians, as well as billions of dollars for new physician hiring and appointment space leases. Lawmakers have expressed concern about the slowness of those changes, and at the lack of firings of VA administrators for problems that came to light. Department officials have promised they are moving as quickly as possible on both fronts.

Congress also will look closely at long-term plans for VA care and reform when President Obama's fiscal 2016 budget proposal is released in early February. VA has been one of the few government agencies to see steady funding increases in recent years, growing almost \$100 billion in the last 11 years. Veterans advocates hope that trend continues for years to come, as the long-term costs of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan become more apparent. But lawmakers have promised closer scrutiny of those funds in months to come, noting that the growth in funding has not always translated into better care and programs for veterans.

[Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane | Jan. 08, 2015 ++]

Congressional Major Events Timeline ►

Previewing a Difficult 2015

This year promises to be a difficult one for the military community. Congress will face proposals to overhaul military pay and compensation while sequestration threatens to cut billions out of the FY 2016 defense budget. Below is an estimated timeline of major events in 2015, including the defense bill process, Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission (MCRMC) report, and the return of sequestration:

- February 1: The congressionally mandated MCRMC will release its report detailing proposals to overhaul military pay, retirement, and other forms of compensation. The details of the report could become available as early as January 30.
- February 2: The president announced he will submit his budget proposal on time to Congress, despite the fact that the MCRMC report will be released at the same time. It's unclear whether the president's budget request will include MCRMC recommendations given the narrow timeframe. However, the proposal is likely to at least include a third consecutive year of military pay raise caps, dramatic TRICARE fee increases, and other controversial measures.
- Mid-March: Six weeks after the president delivers his budget to Congress, congressional committees are required to submit their "views and estimates" of spending and revenues within their respective jurisdictions to the House and Senate Budget Committees.
- May-June: The House and Senate Armed Services Committees will begin work on the FY 2016 defense bill. The committees will need to consider recommendations from the MCRMC and how to deal with the specter of sequestration returning in FY 2016.
- June-July: Full House and Senate pass their respective versions of the defense bill.
- July-October: House and Senate negotiators resolve differences between their respective versions.
- October 1: Across-the-board sequestration cuts return, slashing the defense budget by approximately \$50 billion in FY 2016.
- October-December: Final defense bill passed by House and Senate and becomes law.

In recent years, Congress failed to complete the work on the defense bill until very late in the year. This delay leads to rushed, behind-the-scenes negotiations that undermines debate on the defense bill. MOAA hopes Congress can stick to its proposed schedule and allow time for discussion and debate on controversial proposals. [Source: MOAA Leg Up Jan. 09, 2015 ++]

Legislative Goals for 2015 ► Bucket List

Active / Reserve Force/Family Issues

- Ensure active duty, Guard and Reserve force sizes meet mission requirements
- Sustain military pay comparability with private sector pay as required by law
- Protect currently serving and retiree benefits from severe, arbitrary sequestration cuts
- Credit all Post-9/11 active duty service toward Guard and Reserve early retirement
- Create new incentives for employers to hire and retain drilling Guard and Reserve members
- Restore tax deductions for reservists' out-of-pocket expenses for travel of 50 miles or more
- Create new incentives for employers/government/contractors to hire military spouses
- Protect funding for commissaries, exchanges, dependent schools and family support programs
- Ensure service sexual assault and suicide prevention measures provide positive outcomes
- Improve professional licensure transferability for service members and spouses
- Require better education on the financial disadvantages of the REDUX retirement option

Health Care Issues

- Avert a 24% Medicare/TRICARE payment cut and fix the statutory formula to improve care access
- Oppose means testing of TRICARE Prime and TRICARE for Life enrollment fees
- Block the consolidation of TRICARE health plans into a single plan providing less choice
- Improve seamless transition and protect Defense and VA health budgets/programs and benefits
- Authorize the option to retain operational reservists' civilian family health insurance upon call-up
- Increase orthodontia payment cap under active duty plan

- Authorize TRICARE coverage for Applied Behavioral Analysis for active and retired members

Retirement/Survivor Issues

- Evaluate Military Compensation & Retirement Modernization Commission recommendations; February 2015
- Oppose military benefit changes that are inconsistent with service career sacrifices
- Preserve full-inflation cost of living adjustments (COLAs)
- End the deduction of VA disability compensation from military retired pay
- End deduction of VA Dependency & Indemnification Compensation from Survivor Benefit Plan annuities
- Implement a more equitable military disability retirement system
- Restore VA Dependency & Indemnification Compensation for spouses who remarry after age 55
- Reform the Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP) calculation for reservists who die performing Inactive Duty Training
- Authorize survivors to retain a deceased retiree's full final month retired pay
- Reform the Uniform Services Former Spouse Protection Act (USFSPA)

Veterans / Other Issues

- Eliminate VA claims backlog and improve quality, efficiency and transparency of claims processing
- Improve VA healthcare services and access for women veterans
- Extend caregiver services and support to qualifying disabled veterans of all conflicts
- Authorize pre-tax payment of health, dental, and long-term health care premiums
- Prevent disproportional Social Security and Medicare penalties for any population segment [Source: MOAA Leg Up Jan. 09, 2015 ++]

DoD Suicide Policy Update ► Clay Hunt SAV Act Reintroduced

A bill to overhaul veteran suicide prevention programs is getting another chance in Congress after being scuttled last month by a retiring Senate budget hawk. The Clay Hunt SAV Act, named after a Marine veteran with post-traumatic stress disorder who committed suicide, was reintroduced 7 JAN by a group of House lawmakers and was expected to be filed in the Senate soon. It calls for a one-stop website with suicide prevention resources for veterans, more Department of Veteran Affairs psychiatrists and an independent review of current department programs to determine which are effective. Veteran groups have lauded the bill, and Hunt's parents repeatedly lobbied for it on Capitol Hill. The VA struggles with veterans suicides, estimated at 22 per day.

The House unanimously passed the bill last year and the Senate was poised to do the same, but in the final hours of the 2014 session Tom Coburn, a GOP senator from Oklahoma, blocked a vote, saying the VA could improve services without a new law and budget cuts were needed to pay the \$22 million price tag. "Solutions to this horrific problem will only come from comprehensive, new ideas that improve the accessibility and effectiveness of mental health care available to our veterans," Rep. Jeff Miller (R-FL) said in a statement released 7 JAN. Miller, who chairs the House Veterans Affairs Committee, said it includes "crucial independent, third-party oversight" and requires greater VA accountability for its suicide prevention programs. Rep. Tim Walz (D-MN) and Rep. Tammy Duckworth (D-IL) also co-sponsored the bill. "We must take action and I continue to believe that this bipartisan bill is a step in the right direction," Walz said in a news release. "We can and must work urgently to send this bill to the president's desk without delay."

Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) will also re-introduce the legislation in the Senate, according to an aide. He filed the bill last year and had 21 co-sponsors. Another of the bill's allies in the upper chamber of Congress, Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-CT) this week was publicly supporting another attempt to pass the bill. Blumenthal, who is now the ranking member on the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, went head-to-head with Coburn last month, urging the Republican to release his hold on the legislation and allow a Senate vote, though the pressure ultimately failed. Coburn was known for his harsh criticisms of government spending and his annual publication the Wastebook, which listed what he considered the most egregious cases. Coburn argued that a massive overhaul of the VA passed last summer already pumped billions of dollars into fixing its programs and said that Congress

should spend this year pressing the department for results on suicide prevention. “Don’t pass another bill; hold the VA accountable,” he said in a Dec. 15 floor speech.

Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of American, a veterans’ service group, has vigorously supported the Clay Hunt bill and says it agrees the VA oversight is needed but that it must be coupled with specific changes to the suicide prevention programs. For example, the bill creates new incentives for hiring more psychiatrists and would force the VA to address a critical lack of staff, according to the group. But it is unlikely the bill will need to survive the same staunch opposition or criticism in the Senate, said Alex Nicholson, the IAVA legislative director. Coburn was virtually the sole opponent and nearly all other Senators from the prior session appeared on board. The group is still feeling out some freshmen lawmakers. “We expect the House to move a lot quicker and most likely the Senate will take up the House-passed version on the floor in February,” Nicholson said. [Source: Stars and Stripes | Travis J. Tritten | Jan. 07, 2015 ++]

National Park Passports ► Lifetime Pass for all Disabled Vets

Sens. Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH) and Susan Collins (R-ME) reintroduced legislation 8 JAN that would give all veterans with a service-related disability a free, lifetime pass to national parks and other federal recreational areas. Such a pass is currently available only to veterans with a 100 percent disability rating from the Department of Veterans Affairs, according to a statement from Shaheen. The bill would allow all veterans disabled because of their service to be eligible for a free, lifetime National Parks and Federal Recreational Lands Pass, and allow them to enjoy hunting, fishing and other recreation on federal public lands. “Veterans who have fought and sacrificed to protect American land deserve the opportunity to enjoy it,” Shaheen said in the statement. “In New Hampshire we are lucky to have some of the most beautiful recreational space in the country. Men and women with a service-connected disability have earned lifetime access to these national treasures.” Collins added, “It is fitting that those who have defended our freedoms should have free access to our nation’s parks and recreational lands. From Acadia and the Appalachians to Yosemite and everywhere in between, our bill would allow Veterans to more easily engage in outdoor activities, which have

been shown to help heal both the visible and invisible wounds of war.” [Source: The Hill | Kristina Wong | Jan. 08, 2015++]

Following is a Summary of Veteran Related Legislation Introduced in the House and Senate since the Last Bulletin was Published

- H.R.22: Hire More Heroes Act of 2015. A bill to amend the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 to exempt employees with health coverage under TRICARE or the Veterans Administration from being taken into account for purposes of determining the employers to which the employer mandate applies under the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. Sponsor: Rep Davis, Rodney [IL-13] (introduced 1/6/2015)
- H.R.76: Enhance Vet Hiring Tax Credit. A bill to amend the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 to provide a tax credit to encourage private employers to hire veterans, to amend title 38, United States Code, to clarify the reasonable efforts an employer may make under the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act with respect to hiring veterans, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Rep Jackson Lee, Sheila [TX-18] (introduced 1/6/2015)
- H.R.90: GAO Review of Budget Requests for VA Medical Care. A bill to direct the Comptroller General of the United States to conduct reviews of certain budget requests of the President for the medical care accounts of the Department of Veterans Affairs. Sponsor: Rep Brownley, Julia [CA-26] (introduced 1/6/2015)
- H.R.91: VA ID Cards. A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to issue, upon request, veteran identification cards to certain veterans. Sponsor: Rep Buchanan, Vern [FL-16] (introduced 1/6/2015)
- H.R.203: VA Mental Health Programs Evaluations. A bill to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to provide for the conduct of annual evaluations of mental health care and suicide prevention programs of the Department of Veterans Affairs, to require a pilot program on loan repayment for psychiatrists who agree to serve in the Veterans Health Administration of the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Rep Walz, Timothy J. [MN-1] (introduced 1/7/2015)

- H.R.216: VA Chief Strategy Officer Position and Duties. A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to submit to Congress a Future-Years Veterans Program and a quadrennial veterans review, to establish in the Department of Veterans Affairs a Chief Strategy Officer, and for other purposes Sponsor: Rep Brown, Corrine [FL-5] (introduced 1/8/2015)
- H.R.218: CHAMPVA Child Eligibility Age. A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to increase the maximum age for children eligible for medical care under the CHAMPVA program. Sponsor: Rep Brown, Corrine [FL-5] (introduced 1/8/2015)
- H.R.220: CHAMPVA Child Eligibility Age. A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to increase the maximum age for children eligible for medical care under the CHAMPVA program. Sponsor: Rep Fortenberry, Jeff [NE-1] (introduced 1/8/2015)
- H.R.245: VA Claim Effective Dates. A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to codify certain existing provisions of law relating to effective dates for claims under the laws administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Rep Abraham, Ralph Lee [LA-5] (introduced 1/9/2015)
- H.R.252: Low-Income Vet Housing Assistance. A bill to provide housing assistance for very low-income veterans. Sponsor: Rep Green, Al [TX-9] (introduced 1/9/2015)
- H.R.260: Vet Renewable Energy Hire Tax Credit. A bill to amend the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 to provide the work opportunity tax credit with respect to the hiring of veterans in the field of renewable energy. Sponsor: Rep Lee, Barbara [CA-13] (introduced 1/9/2015)
- H.R.271: Establish VA Mental Illness Commission. A bill to establish a commission to examine the evidence-based therapy treatment model used by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs for treating mental illnesses of veterans and the potential benefits of incorporating complementary alternative treatments available in non-Department of Veterans Affairs medical facilities within the community. Sponsor: Rep Bilirakis, Gus M. [FL-12] (introduced 1/12/2015)
- H.R.272: MOH Recipient VA Enrollment Priority. A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to increase the priority for enrollment of medal of honor recipients in the health care system of the Department of Veterans

Affairs, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Rep Walberg, Tim [MI-7] (introduced 1/12/2015)

- H.R.280: VA Bonus Employee Recoupment. A bill to authorize the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to recoup bonuses and awards paid to employees of the Department of Veterans Affairs. Sponsor: Rep Miller, Jeff [FL-1] (introduced 1/12/2015)
- S.114: Public Access to VA Research. A bill to require the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to provide the public with access to research of the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Sen Heller, Dean [NV] (introduced 1/7/2015) [Source: <https://beta.congress.gov> & <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills> Jan. 13, 2015 ++]

DANA ► Frontline Brain Thermometer

Army medics will soon use what's been dubbed a "brain thermometer": a mobile phone application that can, within minutes, provide health professionals data to help diagnose and measure a soldier's injuries. The Defense Automated Neurobehavioral Assessment, produced by AnthroTronix (DANA), includes five-, 20- and 45-minute batteries of both neurocognitive tests and psychological survey questions. DANA will not only help a health professional diagnose traumatic brain injury, but also provide valuable information that can help isolate depression, post-traumatic stress, and other neurocognitive issues, according to AnthroTronix CEO Corinna Lathan.

The test, similar to a video game, consists of various on-screen exercises during which a soldier's speed and accuracy are scored. Ultimately, a medical provider — potentially in theater — would analyze the post-injury test in concert with the pre-deployment baseline tests. "In essence, measuring reaction time is like taking the temperature of the brain," Lathan said in an Army news release. "It's a vital part of the data that any health professional needs to evaluate his patient." The Army, this fall, received Food and Drug Administration clearance, said Lt. Col. Chessley Atchison, the program manager for the Technology Enabled Capability Demonstration: Brain in Combat portfolio of the Combat Casualty Care Research Program. That clearance means it's safe to use; the FDA did not test its clinical usefulness. It also means providers can use the tool in the field, though the Army is not pushing it on clinicians at this point.

The tool has tested as reliable and durable in a variety of harsh combat environments in a peer-reviewed study in the Military Medicine journal, Lathan said. A Johns Hopkins researcher found in another study that its results correlated highly with the mini-mental state examination, regarded as a highly reliable cognitive impairment assessment tool in clinical and research settings. The new tool will continue to be vetted for battlefield use, the Army reports, and work is underway to use it with tablets in addition to smartphones. "Once we get it right, we're going to put it fairly far forward in the field," Atchison said. There are also ongoing studies of the tool regarding its capacity to help assess concussions with the athletic department at the University of Wisconsin and PTSD at the Department of Veterans Affairs.

The tool will not replace the mandated pencil-and-paper Military Acute Concussion Evaluation as an in-theater assessment, nor the computer-based Automated Neuropsychological Assessment Metric used for a pre-deployment baselines. Atchison said that would be a matter of policy and doctrine changes outside the scope of the joint project. But clinicians can use DANA now to supplement that information. [Source: ArmyTimes | Kyle Jahner } Jan. 03, 2015 ++]

Military Retirement Pay Update ► Congress Went too Far in 2006

At the urging of then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Congress in 2006 took aggressive steps to raise pay and future retirement of currently serving general and admirals, particularly those serving beyond 30 years. Having been a well-compensated industry executive, Rumsfeld viewed admirals and generals as underpaid. Besides raising star-rank pay, he wanted the military basic pay table expanded to incentivize longer service. He got what he wanted, and maybe more. In September 2006, a newly retired member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff who served 38 years drew initial retired pay of \$114,000 a year. Today a JCS member retiring after 38 years draws more than double that amount, about \$241,000. If that four-star officer completes a 40-year career, his or her retired pay today would be higher. Four officers today receive more than \$256,000 in retired pay and one gets more than \$277,000, according to the Defense Department actuary. The fact is generals and admirals recently have been enjoying a kind of golden age of star-rank compensation, shaped in wartime and not likely to be seen again,

particularly given a change in law that takes effect 1 JAN. Star-rank officers won't get a 2015 pay raise. More significantly, any additional years they serve won't have the hefty consequences on retired pay seen since 2006. Star-rank annuities jumped so far and fast that recently retired three-star and four-star officers now make considerably more in retired pay than did while on active duty. That's true even counting housing allowance of about \$40,000 annually or, more often, the comparable value of residing in three-star and four-star base housing. Congress included in the fiscal 2015 Defense Authorization Act a provision that phases out a "too generous" retired pay anomaly gradually, fully protecting the pay of senior officers already retired and easing the impact too on currently serving officers who already wear stars.

The universe of three- and four-star officers drawing more pay in retirement than they did on active duty is small, about 130. But the pay disparity is large, \$70,000 or more for some O-9s and O-10s above what they received in basic pay while on active duty. To understand why, we need to look at all of the levers Congress pulled seven years ago:

- **RETIRED PAY MULTIPLIER** – Before 2007, service members received no retirement credit for years served beyond 30. The multiplier for calculating retired pay was still 2.5 percent of basic pay per year served but the years were capped at 30, capping retirement at 75 percent of basic pay. Effective Jan. 1, 2007, the 30-year cap was lifted for retirements on or after that date. Service members who stayed beyond 30 could continue to earn 2.5 percent of basic pay toward retirement, all the way to 40 years where annuities top out at 100 percent of basic pay.
- **40-YEAR PAY TABLE** – On April 1, 2007, a 40-year pay table went into effect, adding new "longevity" steps in basic pay for officers O-6 and above, warrant officers in grades 4 and 5, and enlisted E-8s and E-9s. Longer-serving O-8s saw two new longevity raises at 30 and 34 years. E-9s, W-5s, O-9s and O-10s saw three, at 30, 34 and 38 years. So for longer careers, the combination of higher retired pay multipliers and added longevity raises led to far more generous retirements.
- **EXECUTIVE PAY CAP LIFTED** – Before 2007, basic pay for generals and admirals could not exceed Executive Level III pay for federal civilians. Even with retired pay limited by the 75 percent multiplier, this executive level

pay cap led to a dampening of star-rank annuities. Congress raised that cap to Executive Level II on Jan. 1, 2007, which lifted basic pay for senior officers sharply. Today that change alone adds more than \$14,600 to senior officer pay. But then Congress granted one more big favor. It changed the law so that the executive level pay cap is ignored in calculating retired pay of flag and general officers.

The effect of all of these changes was huge. A member of the Joint Chief who retired in April 2007 with 38 years service began drawing retired pay 83 percent higher than the JCS member who retired after 38 years in September 2006 or earlier. Four-star retired pay popped by \$95,000. Longer serving enlisted members also benefited, at least from the 40-year pay chart and expanded retired pay multiplier. An E-9 retiring in April 2007 after 38 years drew 53 percent more retired pay than a colleague of equal grade and longevity who retired seven months earlier.

Congress never expressed a regret about the generous star-rank retirement it voted until last January. During a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on the COLA-minus-1 fiasco, when Congress rushed to cut the value of military retirement then quickly reversed itself, Sen. Kelly Ayotte (R-NH) referred to news article. Today's highest-ranking officers, she said quoting from the piece, could earn more military compensation in retirement than they did while on active duty. Wasn't that a negative incentive to continue to serve, she asked. The committee found no proof that it was. However, it didn't seem right that retired pay exceeded active duty compensation by a wide margin. So senators included language in the 2015 defense bill (HR 3979) that restores the Executive Level II cap on retired pay calculations. The change is designed to land softly, however. It applies only to years served after 2014. "That means if you've earned above the cap up until this point, you can keep that but go no higher," explained one congressional aide. "And if you retired before Dec. 31, 2014, this doesn't even apply." So finance centers will conduct two computations to determine retired pay of senior officers serving today and will use the one that delivers higher annuities. One calculation will be retired pay based on current law and rank at retirement, capped at Executive Level II, which is \$183,300 for 2015. A second will determine retired pay these officers would have if they retired on Dec. 31, 2014, at the rank then held and years then served. The second calculation will protect a lot of retired pay at first, and become less important over time. An officer's actual

rank at retirement will be unaffected by the retired pay calculation used. [Source: Stars & Stripes | Tom Philpott | Dec. 31, 2014 ++]

Counting Every Veteran on the Way to Ending Homelessness

Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert A. McDonald is taking a firsthand look at the issue of homelessness among Veterans by participating in this year's Point-in-Time (PIT) Count in Los Angeles, California. The PIT Count typically takes place in locations around the country during the month of January.

Secretary McDonald remains committed to the goal of eliminating Veteran homelessness. The January 2014 PIT Count revealed that 49,993 Veterans were homeless on a single night representing a 33-percent decline in homelessness among Veterans since 2010. In FY 2014 alone, through VA's various homeless programs, more than 72,000 Veterans and their family members were placed in permanent housing or prevented from becoming homeless.

"There is no question that the goal to end Veteran homelessness is within reach, and we remain laser-focused on it," said Secretary McDonald. "Ending Veteran homelessness in America is more than hitting a number, it's about helping communities put a system in place that can house every Veteran experiencing homelessness today and prevent it in the future. I am so heartened that over 440 mayors, governors, county executives and other local officials have joined us and are committed to ending Veteran homelessness in their communities. We will continue our work until all Veterans have a place to call home."

By estimating the number of homeless Veterans, the PIT Count gauges progress in achieving President Obama and VA's goal of ending Veteran homelessness by the end of 2015. Annual data from the PIT Count also assists VA staff and partner agencies in targeting homeless resources where they are needed most. VA has a wide range of programs that prevent and end homelessness among Veterans, including health care, housing solutions, job training and education. Also since 2010 there has been nearly 43-percent reduction in unsheltered homeless Veterans.

As part of VA's continued commitment to ending Veteran homelessness, Secretary McDonald, has directed his senior VA leaders to take part in this year's count in cities across the United States and learn how the organizations they lead can continue to support VA's efforts to end Veteran homelessness. Twenty senior VA leaders will participate in PIT counts everywhere from New York to California to places in between. The PIT Count is led by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) each year to estimate the number of Americans, including Veterans, who are homeless.

As a result of VA's work with HUD, as well as the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness and other federal, state and local partners, significant progress has been made since VA's initiative to end Veteran homelessness began in 2010.

More information about VA's homeless programs is available at www.va.gov/homeless. Veterans who are homeless or at imminent risk of becoming homeless should contact their local VA Medical Center and ask to speak to a homeless coordinator.

VA Announces Single Regional Framework under MyVA Initiative

Washington – The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) today announced that it is taking the first steps under the MyVA initiative to realign its many organizational maps into one map with five regions to better serve Veterans.

The new regions under the MyVA alignment will allow VA to begin the process of integrating disparate organizational boundaries into a single regional framework to enhance internal coordination.

“We want every Veteran to have a seamless, integrated, and responsive VA customer service experience every time. This regional alignment is the first step in empowering Veterans to interact with one VA – MyVA,” said Secretary Robert McDonald. “Ultimately, this reform will improve the Veteran experience by enabling Veterans to more easily navigate VA and access their earned care and benefits.”

VA's new regional design utilizes state boundaries to divide the country into five regions. Each organization within VA will begin work to ensure their structures are aligned within this framework by the end of June 2015.

Veterans are already seeing the impacts of changes made through the MyVA initiative. For example, at the suggestion of VA employees, the Department has made improvements to VA call center operations, to allow call center agents to suspend or resume certain benefit payments at the request of the Veteran, which eliminates additional steps typically required of Veterans. Also at the suggestion of employees, VA is working towards piloting improved signage in certain facilities, to make sure Veterans know where they are going and that directions are easy to follow.

Additional VA efforts are currently underway to define the next steps to transform the Department into one that is more centered on the Veteran.

Background on MyVA

Launched on September 2, 2014, MyVA is an initiative which will reorient VA around Veteran needs and empower employees to assist them in delivering excellent customer service to improve the Veteran experience. It is the largest department-wide transformation in VA's history and will be a product of ideas and insights shared by Veterans, employees, members of Congress, VSOs, and other stakeholders.

The first phase of MyVA has included creating the task force and building the team to support the mission and an organizational change of this breadth. MyVA is focused on five areas of improvement:

- 1) Improving the Veteran experience
- 2) Improving the employee experience so they can better serve Veterans
- 3) Improving internal support services
- 4) Establishing a culture of continuous improvement, and
- 5) Enhancing strategic partnerships.

[The Regional Map can be seen at:

<http://www.va.gov/opa/publications/docs/myva-5-regions-map.pdf>]

Department of Veterans Affairs Reaches Historic Breakthrough Agreement in the Next Step to End Homelessness Among Los Angeles Veterans

Los Angeles — U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Secretary Robert A. McDonald and attorneys representing homeless veterans in Los Angeles announced an agreement that dedicates the West Los Angeles VA campus to serving veterans in need, and commits the department to design a plan to help end homelessness among veterans in Los Angeles County. The agreement is an important step forward in carrying out President Obama's commitment that no veteran should live on the streets, or forego necessary medical and psychological services.

"This agreement offers VA a historic opportunity to build new community relationships in Los Angeles and continue the work needed to end veteran homelessness here," said Secretary McDonald. "VA is proud of the progress we've made in ending veteran homelessness—down 33 percent since 2010—but we won't be satisfied until every veteran has a home."

Under the agreement, Secretary McDonald and plaintiffs' representatives will develop by February 13, 2015 a written plan to help end veteran homelessness in Greater Los Angeles. The plan will focus on serving veterans, particularly homeless veterans, women veterans, aging veterans and veterans that are severely disabled. Secretary McDonald will appoint a Special Assistant, who will report directly to him, to oversee the plan's implementation with the necessary resources and support.

"This historic agreement, forged through the leadership of Secretary McDonald, creates a partnership that will be invaluable to help end veteran homelessness in Los Angeles, provide needed medical care and services, and make concrete our commitment to those who served our nation's highest calling," said Ron Olson, one of the counsels for the organizations bringing the lawsuit.

Under the agreement, Secretary McDonald will also launch an accelerated process to develop a new long-term Master Plan for the future use of the West Los Angeles campus. This Master Plan, which is targeted to be completed by

October 16, 2015, will prioritize the provision of bridge housing and permanent supportive housing. It will also describe an exit strategy for third-party land use agreements that do not comply with applicable laws, and do not fit within the Master Plan. Representatives from the veterans' community will be actively involved in providing input to the Master Plan, along with other stakeholders, including the local community.

Attorneys for homeless veterans agreed to pursue a dismissal of the lawsuit *Valentini v. McDonald*, which was filed in 2011. Plaintiffs are represented by the ACLU Foundation of Southern California, Public Counsel, and Inner City Law Center, with the pro bono support of Arnold & Porter LLP, Munger, Tolles & Olson LLP, and Harvard Law School Professor Laurence H. Tribe. The landmark case was a major impetus behind realizing the vision of eliminating homelessness in Los Angeles among veterans who entered the military to serve the nation.

"The Department of Justice is pleased to have come to a positive resolution in this nearly four year litigation," said Acting Assistant Attorney General Joyce R. Branda for the Justice Department's Civil Division. "Ending this litigation will facilitate the continuing partnership between the Department of Veterans Affairs and key stakeholders to end veteran homelessness in greater Los Angeles in 2015 and beyond."

The 387-acre West Los Angeles VA campus was deeded to the United States in 1888 to serve as a home for disabled veterans. Today, Los Angeles has the nation's largest population of homeless and veterans with disabilities.